STATE OF NEW YORKE EMPIRE

It's true! **Radiohead** are back, new songs and all, and they're ready to take on the world. *NME* braves the thunder and lightning in Provence to witness their triumphant, if slightly moist, return.

Jonny: "waves of choral melody"

Thom: a fine young cannibal

Arles: the calm before the storm

Radiohead: perhaps performing 'Why Does It Always Rain On Me?'

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It's been 18 months since Radiohead bid farewell to the world at the Bercy Stadium in Paris. Bar a one-off appearance by Thom Yorke and guitarist Jonny Greenwood at a Tibetan Freedom concert in Amsterdam last June, they've spent the intervening period secluded in various European locations carefully constructing a suitable riposte to 'OK Computer' – the most critically acclaimed album ever, and a milestone hanging heavily around their collective necks. It's been an absence that's provoked speculation on a frenzied scale.

Dark stories circulated that the band were finding it impossible to write material that measured up to their magnum opus. Bassist Colin Greenwood later admits to *NME* that the excessive praise last time around "did Thom's head in". And whatever the truth about a crisis of confidence, we know that they – along with producer Nigel Godrich – flitted from the Medley Studios in Copenhagen to the Studio Guillame Tell in Paris, before finally ending up in Gloucestershire.

We do, however, know something of what the album will sound like from the snippets released through their website (www.radiohead.com). They've been working "like painters"; they've linked the songs together with "ambient intermezzos"; Thom has "had enough of feeling helpless and dwelling in *(his)* existential – and now highly profitable – angst", so it's going to be more overtly political; some tracks feature strings and, well, that's about it.

It's not much to go on, admittedly, but tonight in Arles at least some of those questions will be answered, because after a year-and-a-half, Radiohead are finally re-emerging from exile. This gig represents the start of an 18-date tour that stretches all the way around the rim of the Mediterranean from Arles to Tel Aviv in Israel. It's a trial run for their Big Top tour in Britain later this year (shows advertised as 'A Genuine Freakshow'). And it's the first opportunity a waiting world has to gauge just how they've gone about trying to match – surpass even – 'OK Computer'.

At the moment, though, the band themselves don't look unduly worried. In the dry heat of the afternoon, a couple of hours before the doors open for tonight's gig, *NME* spots various members of the group milling around outside their hotel. Drummer Phil Selway happily chats away to fans, signs autographs and assures us he's "chilled out" about tonight.

Colin and guitarist Ed O'Brien are laughing and joking on the steps of a local café and when *NME* meets up with the band's tour manager, he says that although they're all pretending to be nervous, they aren't really. It's the kind of quiet confidence that bodes well.

> Their first gig back is a masterclass in controlled confidence.

Three hours later, people aren't looking so relaxed. The open-air Theatre Antique might still be a good place to see a gig 2,000 years after the Romans came up with the original concept, but it's not perfect. Just before Radiohead are due to go onstage at 9.30pm, the heavens open on its crumbling pillars and banks of steep granite steps. Onstage, roadies hurriedly carry awnings to protect the amps and drape huge sheets of polythene over the racks of effects pedals taped to the floor. The 2,000-strong crowd (tonight, amazingly, isn't sold out) huddle together and begin to grow impatient as the minutes tick by.

Finally at 10pm, the rain has abated sufficiently for the action to commence. The band stride onstage with sheepish grins and their arms raised aloft. An obviously relaxed Thom Yorke – sporting a Weller-esque white jacket – approaches the mic and shouts, *"Bonsoir, toute le monde!"*, just as he's consumed by a fog of dry ice. It's the cue for the band to swirl off into the breezy understatement of 'Talk Show Host'. *"You want me"*, sings Thom, *"Well, c'mon and fucking find me"*.

They follow it with a muscular run through of 'Bones', with Jonny crouched over his pedals recreating the sound of a lunar landing. And then it's the moment everyone's waiting for: the first new song. Announced as 'Optimistic', it's a dense groove of dissonant strings and oscillating minor chords, Thom starts screaming and a wave of relief sweeps the arena. It's rapturously received – and instantly dispels any doubts about their state of mind.

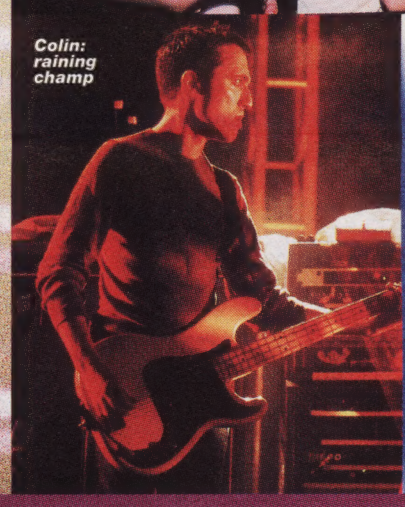
Over the next two hours, the band unveil a further six new songs and it's clear that the sonic experiments which permeated 'OK Computer' have been refined and expanded upon. 'National Anthem' – which appears halfway through the set after a bristling 'Street Spirit (Fade Out)' – sees Thom balancing on the lip of the stage as a fat distorted beat loops itself around him. To his right, Ed is bending one note of feedback into infinity, while Jonny stands over his keyboard pushing out waves of choral melody. As it builds to a symphonic climax, Thom retreats from the edge of the stage and starts scratching the air in front of his face as blasts of ethereal noise whistle past him. It's a breathtaking moment.

This chopped-up, groove-based approach is indicative of the direction Radiohead seem to have taken. Both 'Morning Bell' and 'Dollars & Cents', two more newies, are stark keyboard-fuelled collages that follow their own circular momentum – not so much songs, as *moods*. They're followed by 'In Limbo', which – with its descending bass motif and jerky, neo-jazz time signature – creates an equally beguiling first impression.

The apex of this aesthetic is reached on 'Everything In Its Right Place', which closes the main set. With Thom on keyboards, it's a sparse, swirling electro experiment which sees Jonny and Ed sitting cross-legged playing with their effects pedals, as they cut-up and distort his vocals to whoops of ecstatic applause.

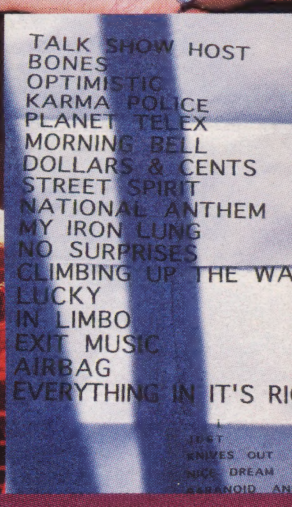
The final new song they play

Instamatic for the people: A gleeful Thom snaps the audience



Colin: raining champ

Thom shows off his freaky dancing



tonight, though, is The One. "This is called 'Knives Out' and it's about... cannibalism," laughs Thom by way of an introduction, before starting to pluck his way through a revolving, and extremely beautiful, acoustic melody. An obvious successor to 'Street Spirit' or 'No Surprises', its colliding harmonies and lithe, spacious sonics silence the crowd completely.

As proof that Radiohead are still capable of a warmth and immediacy that other groups consistently struggle to achieve, it's without equal tonight. When it spirals to a close and the group begin to negotiate their way through 'Nice Dream' and then a final, apocalyptic take on 'Paranoid Android', its melody still sticks in your mind. And it's a reverie that most people are only jolted from as Thom Yorke says his goodbye. A broad grin across his face, he concludes – rather touchingly – by saying, "Thank you for being so nice on our first gig back."

And that's it. After 18 months away, Radiohead are back with us and – on first listen – their new material seems an intriguing progression from the staunchly left-field heartbeat of 'OK Computer'. Lyrically, the songs are as intense and enigmatic as their predecessors; there's no overt sloganeering or obvious political content. As to whether they'll eclipse the old material, who knows? Tonight, songs like 'Exit Music (For A Film)' and 'Karma Police' sound as monumental as ever, but they're not obviously in a different class. If the band were dogged by uncertainties as they constructed their new record, it doesn't show. Their first gig back is a masterclass in controlled confidence, the performance of a band utterly at ease with itself.

Back at their hotel afterwards, the band certainly radiate that feeling. Jonny and Ed stick their head around the door of the bar, wave effusively and announce that they're off for an early night. Phil soon joins them. But Thom and Colin seem happy to sit and talk to the assembled crew members scattered around the room. After a while, Thom walks over and announces he "really enjoyed the show", before he too heads upstairs. Which leaves Colin.

He comes to sit with *NME* and spends the next couple of hours enthusing about their new album (still no title) and the Net (he loves Napster, even if you can download 14 unreleased Radiohead tracks off it), as well as explaining how the band never want to go this long without releasing a record again. He reveals that one possible plan after the LP comes out is to showcase the tracks that didn't make it on over a series of 12"s (a plan inspired by The Beta Band). He goes on to say that 'National Anthem' is Jonny's favourite track on the new record (especially the free-jazz bit) and that he thought tonight's gig was "good, but a bit shaky". As the clock hits 3am and a storm of biblical proportions begins outside, he finally decides it's time for bed. He says he'll try to catch up with us tomorrow, but that's the last we see of him.

> "This is called 'Knives Out' and it's about... cannibalism." – **Thom**

The next day, the tour is set to continue in Vaison La Romaine, a small picturesque town just east of Orange. *NME* senses something might be about to go wrong when we look up at the sky and see banks of black thunderclouds. As our car winds its way through Avignon and up through the brittle, arid landscape of Provence, the biblical storm of the night before returns with a vengeance. The horizon begins to strobe with flashes of forked lightning and then it starts to deluge. And it doesn't stop for our whole two-hour journey.

When we finally arrive in Vaison La Romaine, the roads have all but vanished beneath a wave of flood water. The dirt track leading to the venue is virtually impassable, but when we get to the top there's a crowd of about 200 people hurling abuse at the security guards. As more and more people start to arrive, word starts to spread that the gig has been cancelled. The open-air venue is no match for the conditions and with Radiohead's equipment constantly short-circuiting during their soundcheck, there's no way it can go ahead.

A few quick phone calls reveal that the band themselves have already boarded their bus for the long drive to the next gig in Barcelona. So *NME* – wet and smelling of small dogs – trudges back to the car park and contemplates an evening marvelling at Vaison's supersonic Roman bridge. We'll spare you the details (suffice to say, the Romans could really do things with bricks) and instead try to leave you on a positive note.

We only heard a fraction of the new songs that Radiohead have to offer tonight, but that was enough to convince us that the most anticipated comeback in living memory will be the success that everyone desperately hopes it is. All those rumours from 'insiders' about how the band had tried too hard to trump 'OK Computer' and only ended up out-weirding themselves seem baseless. The most vital British band are in good shape. Although they play Meltdown in a couple of weeks, you're more likely to find out for yourself when they tour in September. Considering the confidence exuded on their first night, you can bet by the time they regroup for that assault, they'll be as peerless as ever.

The praise lavished upon them last time around might have unnerved them to such an extent that they were forced to disappear for a year-and-a-half, but this time you get the feeling they'll be better prepared when their album finally appears on October 2. Let's hope so, because the backlash isn't about to start here.